

Reasons for Dancing

Dr Carol Brown

April 6th 2011

Liz Aggiss is a *lippy* choreographer who likes to change frocks¹. Getting lippy for Professor Aggiss, is a form of parodic play with her audience a send-up of the conventions of good taste and the rhetorics of the professorial address. But it is also *beyond lippy* a technique that carries a serious intent in inviting us to get under the skin of her text to en flesh meaning through movement inviting the question, *how it is we are here?*

Her lips rouged in red are puckered, pressed and opened whilst she recites seven dance commandments to counter the litany of choreographic failures she sees being inflicted upon contemporary audiences.

- 1 Thou shalt not improvise, keep your improvising for the bathroom
- 2 Thou shalt never run around the stage in circles for no apparent reason, no one wishes to see that
- 3 Look your audience in the eye, dancers who only look at themselves have something to hide
- 4 Thou shalt not wear leotards made from lycra
- 5 On no account hurt or damage your dancers
- 6 Say what you have to say then stop. If you have nothing to say don't even start.
- 7 No dance piece shall last longer than 42 minutes. So get on with it.²

A self-confessed hyper-critical artist working out of Brighton, UK, Aggiss insists that good dance depends upon being a good performer as well³. A performance style shaped and informed by early experiences touring with the Wild Wiggles in support of iconic rock band, The Stranglers, Aggiss developed a low tolerance for the worthy but dull of contemporary dance. Always a maverick artist within the UK scene, Aggiss shunned the conventions of contemporary dance and developed her own methods and aesthetic. Working with the length of a pop song and with Bauhaus inflected costumes that outrageously framed the body, the Wiggles created absurdist dance vignettes using repetition and simple rhythmic movements. During a talk with University of Auckland Dance Studies Postgraduate students Aggiss recollected her punk audience clamoring to get on stage, the force of which invited her to question: *'Where do you go from here?'*

Although Aggiss claims that the curse of dance is the desire to be beautiful, she recommends wearing lipstick and a frock in the studio. It's a seemingly frivolous strategy counter to the presumed naturalness of the unadorned body that dominates so much contemporary dance practice. Although a feminist position on this advice might question so fervent an advocacy for the disciplinary norms of femininity, an alternative view might consider how Liz stages a revolt against the mundane and banal through an appropriation

¹ Being *lippy* is a colloquialism not only for wearing lipstick but also for sassy backtalk as well as talk that unsettles as in, 'she's getting lippy with me'.

² Spoken text from *Hi Jinx* by Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, performed by Liz Aggiss, TAPAC, TEMPO 2010 7-8 Oct 2010.

³ Liz Aggiss is a Professor in the Faculty of Arts, University of Brighton. She came to New Zealand as a visiting artist-scholar supported by NICAI, University of Auckland and the British Council.

of the codes of glamour and beauty. Making a home for oneself in one's body is increasingly about the 'makeover', a kind of home improvement system that turns many women into manic consumers of products and clothes. But there is another angle to this. As Erin McKean claims in the *Secret Lives of Dresses*⁴, the seeming frivolity of frocks makes for many women a meaningful site of inhabitation. For a frock makes a place a woman can occupy of her own. In advising emerging choreographer-dancers to wear lipstick and chose clothes that are not functional but decorative, Aggiss seems to be suggesting a self-conscious fashioning as a staging of identity⁵. Such a staging brings spectatorship into the scene, refusing the forgetting of the other who meets my gaze at the performance *counter*.

Aggiss's principles of practice refuse forgetting that we are part of a social scene and at the same time an expression of the place of the other. Paying attention to appearance and self-identity is one way to open the studio as a place of (en)counter with the other in anticipation of audience. Choreographic states emerge in Aggiss's work through bodily rhythms framed by very specific costume, make-up and hair choices for her performing personae, the force of these can be read as an intense and continuous questioning of presence that exceeds gender determination.

In these post-Deleuzian, post-representational times it can be uncomfortable an experience to be brought back to this insistence on the body as a type of stage through which we *act out* and *act up*. But, with a history of connection to arts activism, anarchism and guerrilla art interventions, Liz is part of a continuity of practice by women-artists who unashamedly make a spectacle of themselves, de-familiarising the coding of femininity and playing with self invention through performance. Unlike the burlesque performer who maybe reinforcing an unconscious desire for self-display and exhibitionism towards voyeuristic pleasure, Aggiss troubles our associations between the female body and its potential for sexual objectification by her candid emphasis upon a fleshy, material body that plays across codings, violating boundaries between being a subject and an object. As she puts it, *'I am subject, object and author.'*⁶ Her body becomes rebellious matter.

Time Out of Joint

Aggiss's dismissal of contemporary dance conventions devoid of a kernel of meaning or concision of articulation together with her insistence on the construction of self-image as a prerequisite for making, propose that we don't lose sight of how, in performing, we are always already read as representational. At the same time her work makes space for reinvention of self-image through a critical engagement with the past. Drawing on legacies of British vaudeville, solo *ausdruckstanz* performance, and comedic pantomime, she reminds us that her experience has already been scripted by the principles and practices of performers of a distant past.

Who are the invisible others who sit in the studio or on your shoulder whilst you practice? Liz asked me this question in 1993 when she mentored my emergent solo performance, *the*

⁴ McKean, Erin (2011) *The Secret Lives of Dresses*. New York: 5 Spot Hatchette.

⁵ Guest Lecture with Postgraduate Choreography students NICAI, University of Auckland, 28th Sept 2010

⁶ Guest lecture, Dance Studies, NICAI, University of Auckland, 28th September 2010.

*Mechanics of Fluids*⁷. Tracing genealogies of presence is part of the act of performance for Liz and in her teaching she revels in the lineages of performance that have directly informed her work. These include historical figures of early modern dance and Ausdruckstanz, in particular Hilde Holger, Hanya Holm and Valeska Gert as well as musical hall performers and comedians such as Max Wall and George Carl. A certain fidelity to history in her non-stage persona is mocked however in her performing personae as she puts on her lipstick, frock and strident shoes to introduce the life of Madame Dzinkowska. Known in the US as *Hi Jinx*, Madame Dzinkowska is imagined as a lost figure in the history of German Ausdruckstanz. Unbound to a canonical reading of dance history, Liz invents a figure of the past to counter the ponderousness and seriousness of a history underwritten by loss. Her invented history is a counter-cultural comic melodrama that rather than mock the history she purports to represent, opens it in/to the present. Since all history is narrative, her telling as mimetic parodying of invented dances, its assertion of principles of practice, and fake filmic documentary underlies something deeply serious, the desire to re-form dance in the light of the past.⁸

What is at stake is not an historical fidelity to the fragmentary trace of performance but a continuity of practice through the genealogies of presence that form its corporeal archive. In terms of Central European Ausdruckstanz, in many instances there are no choreographies to be resurrected, no dance technique to be restored, no film to be recovered. What we hang onto however is the corporeal trace of our teachers, their voices, their gestures, their emphatic accents⁹. But rather than play tribute to these mentors, risking a tutelage forever bound to their content, Liz sets their principles of practice free from the earnestness of the historian or the diligent fidelity of the reconstructor.

Although Aggiss never loses sight of Aggiss, there is an insistence on her own identity becoming crystallised through being a conduit for the memories of others. Being present is always complicated by non-presence. Performing as 'Liz Aggiss' becomes part of the performance itself, '*I am Liz Aggiss*' she declares but this presence is staged as a self-reflection reconceived as difference in the Derridean sense through genealogies of presence that include fictions of history, illusion and biography. This play on codes of representation is countered however with an empathic and humorous appeal through backtalk to thighs that wobble and flesh that sags unexpectedly. Performance is constantly revealed through performative acts that challenge us to think about what is real and what is fake. This goes to the heart of the evental nature of performance as something that takes place in the moment of encounter with audience and through which subject positions are formed and de-formed. As the French writer Hélène Cixous states, *It is the other who makes my portrait. Always.*¹⁰

⁷ *The Mechanics of Fluids* was performed towards completion of *Inscribing the Body* (PhD University of Surrey). Premiered in 1994 at the Lilian Bayliss Theatre, Sadlers Wells, London it went on to tour New Zealand in 1995.

⁸ For further discussion of the historical traces of Ausdruckstanz in *Hi Jinx* see Kant, M. 'Liz Aggiss and the Authentick Grotesque Exhibitionism' in Aggiss, L. and Cowie, B. with Bramley, I. eds. (2006) *Anarchic Dance*. London and New York: Routledge 22-36.

⁹ I first met Aggiss at the studio of Hilde Holger in London having gone there for classes based on the Bodenwieser Method. I had learnt Bodenwieser technique with Shona Dunlop-MacTavish in Dunedin, New Zealand. Both Holger and Dunlop-MacTavish trained in Vienna with Gertrud Bodenwieser.

¹⁰ Cixous, H. and Calle-Gruber, M. 1997 *Rootprints: Memory and Life-Writing* London and New York: Routledge 13

Sounding Out

The border blur between the imagination and the real, fiction and history, is further reinforced by the gap between what we see and what we hear. A characteristic of Aggiss's work is her use of sound to draw us into an image and to force us to question the veritability of sight. In *Hi Jinx* the relationship between live and recorded sound reinforces a gap between the material thereness of the live encounter of the performer and the not-thereness of the absent figure of the past. The mediation of presence through amplification calls into question how we are here. This is particularly so in the 'joint dance' where Aggiss clicks each joint to a recorded sound track. The 'as ifness' of this deliberate pretence creates a sense of dis-ease, problematising the durability of the body through its fallible thereness. The technique is reminiscent of the use of foley in post-film production where the sounds to accompany a recorded image are recorded at a later date in a studio. A feature of Aggiss's work is her ability to use sound to draw us into the image and to make us question what we are seeing. Such an approach is continuous with the exaggerated persona she adopts on stage, a way to amplify presence, visually and audibly, to make being heard.

Re-Fashioning the World

Aggiss presents her view of the world in the hopes that others will see their worlds differently. She plays on stereotypes of femininity, making awkward fumbling gestures with layers of underpants, playing with her body as a kind of home, that gets up to all sorts, between two lips.

Making speech that sings - my, my, my, my - she takes us on. Turning language into gestures; making a spectacle of herself; she turns her body into a theatre of enquiry. Violating boundaries between history, fiction and personal narrative. Her work asks questions about what it means to be a performer, a performer whose work is always already ghosted by a past that can never be recovered but that remains, in certain body attitudes, certain styles of speech, certain accents of style.

The value of thinking through my body the teacher, is found in Liz's integration of the past in the present, the ability of a knowing body, knowing of its genealogies of performance. This knowledge about what it is to perform plays across different modes, as a parody of an historical lecture, as illusionary trickery, as confessional and personal testimony.

This communication relies on certain registers of performance that are known and solicit humour, empathy and astonishment in audiences. Staging a lecture as performance within a theatre, suggests some of the conventions of the academic as performer, yet in Aggiss's iteration of this form effectively mobilises boundary violations. Her performance lecture takes strange turns; she squats, undresses, demonstrates hyper-mobile joints, tells stories and directly confronts her audience with a kind of belligerent 'lippiness'. In this way, the performance as lecture becomes a *signature event* with Aggiss, a strange figure of discourse, metaphorically displacing the conventions of the professorial address with an altered communication. Her performance as lecture carries with it the force of breaking with its context, proliferating meanings beyond the singular univocal presence of the professorial address. This rupture is due to a certain spacing opened by a self-conscious fashioning of 'self' in dialogue with the poignancy of a lost past.